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ABSTRACT

This fact sheet begins with an overview of family support programs, which includes a discussion of the premises of family support programs and a list of typical program components. The remainder of the fact sheet focuses on support programs for incarcerated parents. The children of incarcerated parents, though innocent of any crime, are often heavily penalized by the justice system by the destabilization or destruction of their family structure. Parental incarceration can have a negative impact on children's emotional and psychological development, and the loss of close attachment with their children can negatively affect parents' eventual parole success. Many prisons lack child-oriented materials for visitors, and few have facilities for housing children with their mothers. More than 100 support programs, driven by the premise that a parent continues to be a parent while in prison, currently target prisoners and their families. These programs facilitate parent-inmates' involvement in and understanding of their children's growth; give them an opportunity to observe and engage in positive interactions with their children; offer peer support; and help parent-inmates continue to function as family members. Brief descriptions of five model programs (Minnesota's Family Services Program; the Women's Activities and Learning Center in Topeka, Kansas; the Children's Center in New York; the Bridge Transition Parenting Program in several northeastern states; and the Therapeutic Intervention Project in California) and five resource organizations are provided. (AC)

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Family Support Programs and Incarcerated Parents

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Overview of Family Support Programs

Family support programs began to appear in the early 1970s and are now proliferating across the country. Initially established as small, grassroots, community-based programs, they are currently growing in number, size, and complexity. The National Resource Center for Family Support Programs has developed a series of Fact Sheets that provide introductions to eight different types of family support programs, addressing the issues of child abuse, family literacy, school readiness, school-linked services, comprehensive collaborative services, alcohol and other drug abuse prevention, and incarcerated parents.

PREMISES OF FAMILY SUPPORT

The influence of the family on a child cannot be overestimated. The family is a child's first source of information and the primary model for how a child experiences relationships. It helps a child begin to communicate and to learn personal and cultural values and beliefs. The family teaches a child ways to live in a complex world, and it provides a child with a sense of belonging and a foundation for self-esteem. Families, and specifically parents, who are confident and effective in these responsibilities are more likely to raise healthy and productive children.

Dramatic changes have occurred in the structure and patterns of family life in the U.S. over the past 20 years. The population has become increasingly mobile, and parents often function without help from extended family. Divorce rates have risen. Many children are born to unmarried mothers or raised in a single-parent household. Others are "latchkey" children whose parents work outside the home. Family support programs have emerged in response to these changes. The settings in which they operate vary widely, as do the types of services and resources they offer to families. But all programs are geared toward a common goal: increasing the ability of families to successfully nurture their children.

Family support programs emphasize a proactive approach toward the prevention of problems. To this end, they provide supports which can enhance effective functioning; and, they foster a sense of family self-sufficiency and empowerment. The structured incorporation of the family into all aspects of programs to enhance a child's development sets family support programs apart from other kinds of services for families.

All family support programs are based on the following assumptions:

- Families have primary responsibility for their children's development and well-being; they need resources and supports that will enable them to fulfill that responsibility effectively.
- Healthy families are the foundation of a healthy society. Families who are unable to promote their children's development ultimately place the entire society at risk.
- Families operate as part of a total system. Children cannot be viewed as separate from their families, nor can families be viewed separately from their communities, their cultural heritage or the society at large. Decisions made on behalf of children must consider the ways in which these various systems are interconnected.
- The systems and institutions upon which families rely for support must assist families' efforts to effectively raise their children. They must adjust and coordinate their services so as not to hinder families' abilities to maintain positive environments for their children.

TYPICAL PROGRAM COMPONENTS

Family support programs operate successfully in diverse communities and settings. Many are separate, free-standing, non-profit agencies; others are sponsored by churches, hospitals, schools, day-care centers, or colleges and universities. Specific program content and structure are determined by the needs of the families being served, and are designed to complement already existing community services and resources. Most family support programs include the following:

- Life skills training. This may include family literacy, education, employment or vocational training, or enhancement of personal development skills such as a problem solving, stress reduction, and communication.
- Parent information classes and support groups. These provide instruction in child development and opportunities for parents to share their experiences and concerns with peers.

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- Parent-child groups and family activities, which provide occasions for parents to spend more time with their children
- Drop-in time to provide parents with informal opportunities to spend time with staff members and other parents
- Information and referral services
- Crisis intervention/family counseling to respond to parents' special concerns about their children or specific family issues
- Auxiliary support services such as clothing exchanges, emergency food, transportation

THE ISSUE OF PARENTAL INCARCERATION

THE IMPACT ON CHILDREN

Justice, it has been said, is about punishing the guilty and acquitting the innocent. Yet the children of incarcerated parents are often the most heavily penalized by the justice system. As the imprisonment of a mother or father can destabilize or completely destroy the family structure they have known, children, innocent of any crime, are unjustly punished. Incarceration robs parents and children of an opportunity to develop strong attachments which can be a critical factor in the parents' eventual parole success.

While the criminal justice system as a whole has improved over the past 30 years, there has been little change in the negative situation for children of incarcerated parents. Many prisons lack child-oriented material for visitors, such as cribs, toys and children's books. Few prisons have any facilities for housing children or infants with their mothers. While some correctional facilities are beginning to address the parental and familial needs of inmates, few help inmates build functional relationships. Incarceration is a punishment of deprivation, one aspect of which is to separate parent-inmates from their families. This prevalent societal view does not support maintaining relationships between criminals and their families.

Women comprise only about five percent of the current prison population, yet their numbers are increasing at a rate greater than that of male prisoners. Between 50 and 75 percent of incarcerated women have children under the age of 18. Twenty-five percent are pregnant or have infants, and between 70 and 90 percent are single parents.

The number of children affected by maternal incarceration is at least 80,000. The real numbers, however, are far greater, since inmate mothers are often reluctant to divulge the fact that they have children, for fear that these children will be placed in foster care. And if inmate-fathers are figured into the equation, the number of children of incarcerated parents is close to one million, according to The Pacific Oaks Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents.

The effects of parental incarceration on children can be harmful, and have a negative impact on their emotional and psychological development. They tend to have poor coping skills and low self-esteem, and to show patterns of aggression, attention disorders, regression, and anxiety. Many experience difficulties with peer relationships, school problems, and delinquency. And many are imprisoned themselves.

Unless the children of incarcerated parents have relatives who will take them in, they become wards of the state and are placed in foster homes, temporarily (and sometimes permanently) dividing them from their families. These children are among the at-risk youth whose high rate of dropout from school is of great concern to educators. These are children for whom the lack of parental care has a major effect on their view of the dependability of their world.

Being deprived of a stable relationship with a parent has long-term consequences for children. This reality has been documented by a wide body of research on the consequences of divorce.

Several critical factors that affect children when parents divorce are similar to those that result when a parent is incarcerated. These include:

- The reduction or total loss of contact with the parent. This terminates the parent's functional role and threatens the development of parent-child attachments.
- The stress created by the unexpected and often sudden departure of the parent. This may be accompanied by a sharp reduction in income and possible housing problems.
- The lack of straightforward information on the parent's whereabouts. Often the family misleads or deceives the children, hiding the fact of the absent parent's incarceration.
- The preoccupation of the remaining parent. This reduces that parent's ability to provide adequate support and attention to children who are already feeling confused and insecure.
- The minimal support provided by family and friends, which can be dependent on the nature of the incarcerated parent's crime and how widespread the knowledge.
- The sense of isolation experienced by the remaining parent and children.

These factors are exacerbated by substance abuse or domestic violence. Many families with an incarcerated parent have such histories.

Ironically, despite the fact that society considers the mother's role of crucial importance, children are less apt to visit imprisoned mothers regularly. Because there are fewer women's facilities in the U.S., women are more likely to be imprisoned outside their local communities, making visitation difficult.

Incarcerated fathers who seek active involvement with their children also face obstacles, and there is a lack of programs designed to enhance their parenting skills. Despite the increasing evidence that the father's role is crucial in children's overall development, children's care and well-being are still widely viewed as the woman's remit.

THE ROLE OF FAMILY SUPPORT

Support programs which target prisoners and their families are a relatively new segment of the family support movement. Program models vary, but all are driven by the underlying premise that a parent continues to be a parent while in prison, regardless of the crime committed.

Despite the stress produced by incarceration, parent-inmates are open to participation in programs that will enhance their relationships with their children. These programs can facilitate their involvement in their children's growth, even if someone else is parenting them on a daily basis, and mitigate the long-term destructive effects of imprisonment.

Support programs give parent-inmates an understanding of their children's development and an opportunity to observe and engage in positive interactions with their children. Peer support helps them cope, learn to enjoy their children, and strengthen feelings of self-esteem.

Family support programs help parent-inmates continue to function as family members and learn new ways of coping with the stresses and emotional issues that they will face when they are released from prison. Parent-inmates can lose sight of the important role they play in their children's

lives; many feel "my children are better off without me." When they are released from prison, they have greater difficulty dealing with normal stresses. They tend to cope by resorting to old norms, such as criminal and addictive behaviors, which increase the likelihood that they will be imprisoned again. Participation in family support programs has been shown to decrease the likelihood of recidivism among parent inmates.

As of 1989, there were over 100 family support programs, in 39 states, which provided information or education to parent inmates, and facilitated opportunities for parent-child visitations.

PROGRAM MODELS FOR INCARCERATED PARENTS

MODEL 1: FAMILY SERVICES

For the past 32 years, the Minnesota Citizens Council on Crime and Justice has been developing services for crime victims and the families of correctional facilities inmates. Founded in 1978 as SOLOS (Sharing Our Lives of Separation), the Family Services program, is designed to address the needs of inmates' families. By first establishing itself as a source of low-cost transportation for prison visits, Family Services builds a basis of trust which allows its staff to help families with personal and practical needs.

Designed to strengthen families' abilities to cope with emotional, financial and physical stress, Family Services provides basic services to families of inmates; maintains weekly transportation to several correctional facilities; and provides intensive parenting education for both the incarcerated parent and those "on the outside." Family education is available for juvenile offenders. Classes for children of parents in the program help develop skills to cope with substance abuse, family violence, and other stressful situations. Post-release transition information and support groups are also available.

Family Services has had great success with family education for incarcerated fathers; many participants request longer class periods or the opportunity to take the classes a second time. The development of programs for mothers and juveniles has allowed Family Services to reach a larger segment of the prison population. All classes are aimed at building self-esteem and encouraging self-discovery. Topics have included dealing with anger; positive discipline; and how to talk with your child (or parent).

Anyone who has a personal relationship with an inmate may participate, and more than 1,000 families received some type of service last year. Clients are usually self-referred or referred by inmates.

MODEL 2: WOMEN'S ACTIVITIES AND LEARNING CENTER

The Women's Activities and Learning Center (WALC), housed in the Central Unit of the Topeka, Kansas, Correctional Facility, is designed to provide programs that strengthen and maintain inmate mothers' relationships with their children, and increase their chances of positive reintegration into their families and society when they are released. WALC is available to any inmate, with or without children. The Central Unit houses about 190 female inmates. The basement at the Central Unit has been completely renovated to provide seven visiting rooms, two conference rooms, a recreation room and playground area, restrooms, and a kitchen for inmate use.

A parent education program, sponsored by the United Methodist Church, includes classes on such topics as prenatal care, parenting skills, child development, self-esteem, and anger management. Any parent who completes the program classes is eligible to attend a three-day retreat with her children. Family visits, craft activities, support and study groups, and special events for inmates and their families are also program components.

One full-time coordinator works with volunteers who teach classes, supervise visits, serve on the advisory board, and organize special events. Nearly all of the program's equipment has been donated; local organizations and private citizens regularly make in-kind contributions.

Inmate "ownership" of the program is encouraged through regular surveys in which they evaluate existing programs and identify additional areas of need.

MODEL 3: THE CHILDREN'S CENTER

The nursery housed in the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in New York is the oldest such facility in the United States. The nursery is provided to inmates and their children through the prison's Children's Center, funded by the Department of Correctional Services and private donations, and administered by Catholic Charities, Diocese of Brooklyn. Inmates help plan all the Center's activities, make arrangements for workshops, and initiate and teach programs.

The facility houses about 800 women, 75 percent of whom are mothers. Female inmates who give birth while in custody can choose to keep their babies with them until the child's first birthday. If the mother is likely to be paroled by the time the infant is 18 months old, the infant can, with special permission, remain. The children are delivered at an outside hospital and then mother and child are housed in the nursery, located in the facility's medical building. An average of ten to fifteen mothers reside in this facility. Inmates with special training run the facility's day-care center, for those times when mothers are taking parenting education classes.

For some mothers, able to go home with their babies or follow soon after birth, the crucial bonding process that takes place during the child's first year creates the basis for a close parent and child relationship. Parent-inmates serving longer terms are counseled to send their babies to whomever will be the child's primary caretaker during his or her formative years.

Other elements of the Children's Center program include the Children's Playroom and the Parenting Center. Eight furlough houses offer temporary transition accommodations to women who have been released and are seeking employment. During the summer, families in the community host the children of inmates for a week, so that the children can spend time with their mothers each day. Many of these families also host the children one Saturday night each month during the school year so that they may visit their mothers.

MODEL 4: BRIDGE TRANSITION PARENTING PROGRAM

The Single Parent Resource Center, Inc., a New York-based information clearinghouse, advocacy and direct-service provider designed to serve single parents in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut administers the Bridge Transition Parenting Program. This program serves women who reside at the Parkside Work Release Facility in upper Manhattan.

The program is designed to aid women participants of a work-release program, in which they work every day and return home three or four times a week and on the weekends to be with their children. A ten-week program combines weekly support groups, twice weekly visits with their children, scheduled family outings, and contacts with job-training opportunities at local colleges. At the end of the program, the participants are awarded a certificate.

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Each cycle currently serves about 50 women. Program staff consists of a full-time relapse-prevention worker, a part-time job resource location manager and a part-time group aid.

The work-release program reduces the transition time necessary for inmate-mothers to reacquaint themselves with their children and the parenting process; the weekly support groups provide the women with much needed opportunities to share concerns about their relationships with their children.

Many of the women's children are in foster care and the staff serve as advocates to secure lenient visitation rights; whenever necessary, they arrange transportation for the children to the Center. Special visiting and transportation arrangements are made for those women whose children live out-of-state.

The Center also provides an opportunity for the women's children to attend a three-week summer camp program in upstate New York. The staff are hopeful that they can raise enough monies in the future to provide a camp experience for the women and their children.

While some women are referred by prison personnel, the Bridge Transition program is completely voluntary; no woman is penalized if she elects not to participate, or if she drops out.

MODEL 5: THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTION PROJECT

This program is a direct-service component of the Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents, at River Oaks College & Children's School in Pasadena, California. While many of the center's programs serve parent-inmates, the overall program philosophy reflects a belief that programming works best when parents have already been released. The goal is to prevent recidivism and second generation incarceration.

The program provides support groups for ex-offender women, recently released from L.A. County jails, aimed at improving the women's ability to make the transition from incarceration to stable, family life. It also provides support groups for children, aimed at improving self-esteem, documenting the development of children of offenders, and addressing the problems of these high-risk children. Family support groups serve partners and adult family members of incarcerated and ex-offender women. Bimonthly support groups help families prepare for and cope with the transition to stable family life. Over 200 women, children and other family members have participated in these groups.

The center also runs a Family/Life Program, aimed at incarcerated fathers and teen parents in juvenile halls. Family/Life educates parent-offenders, focusing on personal and family relationship issues specific to incarcerated parents and their children. These courses are offered at correctional institutions.

With the exception of the center's director, all staff members are themselves ex-offenders.

RESOURCE ORGANIZATIONS

The National Resource Center for Family Support Programs (NRC/FSP)

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The National Resource Center for Family Support Programs (NRC/FSP) was established to assure the availability of current knowledge in the field of family support on the design, development, and implementation of family support programs.

The NRC/FSP operates a computerized database to document and disseminate information on exemplary and innovative family support programs across the country.

The Center identifies and develops resource materials for policymakers and practitioners (such as program descriptions, bibliographies, program development manuals, training curricula and monographs), and provides technical assistance, training, and consulting in family support program design and operations.

AIM (Aid to Incarcerated Mothers)

32 Rutland Street
Boston MA 02118
617/536-0058

Help Me to Fight: A videotape of interviews with inmates and AIM volunteers; a compelling view of mothers for whom the greatest prison hardship is separation from their children. $35 rental, $150 purchase.

Staying Together: a videotape focused on the importance of consistent prison visiting between mothers and children. $35 rental, $100 purchase.

Family and Corrections Network

P.O. Box 39
Batesville, VA 22924
804/823-5115

An independent clearinghouse for information on working with families involved in correctional systems. Publishes quarterly reports on existing programs; annual directory of programs; provides technical assistance for those who are developing programs, and sponsors conferences and workshops.

Legal Services for Prisoners with Children

1535 Mission Street
San Francisco, CA 94103
415/255-7036

Information and referral services for prisoners, children and families. Provides technical assistance for lawyers, social workers and community services groups. Publishes manuals and information packets. Recent publications: Child Custody Issues for Prisoners; Foster Care and Incarcerated Parents; Guardianship Manual for Incarcerated Parents.

National Institute of Corrections, Information Center

1860 Industrial Circle, Suite A
Longmont, CO 80501
303/682-0213

Prints and furnishes materials relevant to correctional practices and policies. Publishes Directory of Programs Serving Families of Adult Offenders.

Center for the Children of Incarcerated Parents

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The Clearinghouse at Pacific Oaks is the database component of CCIP and maintains a comprehensive bibliography on the children of incarcerated parents and related issues. Includes the Prison M.A.T.C.H. archives and distributes Prison M.A.T.C.H. publications. Incarcerated parents receive materials at no cost.

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